

Who's Seen the T-HANDLE?

By Lt. Mike Meeks

Our crew was tasked to turnover the airborne-command-post (ABNCP) primary alert that included a plane swap of our E-6B. Our six-hour mission was scheduled to depart Offutt AFB, Neb., and relocate to Travis AFB, Calif.

At 1415, our relief arrived for the primary-alert turnover. Unfortunately, around 1445, after the battle staff had arrived for turnover, our relief was told the aircraft was down for FOD. After a FOD search, their aircraft was back up. We swapped planes, refueled, and, following relief from the other crew, started to preflight at 1615. At 1645, we started engines to cool the aircraft and to assist communication preflight. The chocks were removed, and engines three and four were started.

The E-6B is equipped with a removable downlock that keeps the nosegear locked down after hydraulic pressure is removed. This downlock is called the T-handle. According to our before-start checklist, the T-handle is to be removed before engine starts. After engines three and four were started, the T-handle remained in place. To the best of our recollection, the aircraft was ready to taxi at 1730.

With our engines running, we received a call from maintenance control, telling us our new aircraft was down for a FOD inspection because of a missing tool from the Travis detachment. The aircraft was inspected thoroughly, but the tool was not found on board. The aircraft was determined to be safe for flight. We again reviewed the "Before Start Checklist" and the "After Start Checklist" to make sure all items were covered. We then told ground of our intentions to taxi to the holdshort, and we awaited final confirmation of the maintenance action form (MAF) sign-off of our relief. A visual confirmation of T-handle removal was made.

After reaching the holdshort, we were told we were not safe for flight unless our flight engineer (FE) signed off the corrected portion of the MAF. We taxied back so the FE could sign the MAF. While taxiing, I coordinated with the ground crew for a follow-me vehicle and for a plane captain

to recover us. I made it clear to ground and our crew we were not going to shut down and would be in the spot only 10 minutes.

Once parked, the plane captain (PC) signaled his trainee was going under the aircraft. The trainee hooked up the long cord and exited from under the aircraft. We again clarified with the ground crew we would not be shutting down, and all we were doing was waiting for the FE to sign off the MAF. I told the PC not to chock the nose; we were "only going to be here for 10 minutes." He rogered up.

We did not know the PC had reinstalled our T-handle because no T-handle hand signal was given to the flight deck, nor did we hear anyone say the T-handle was inserted. As soon as the FE returned to the jet, ground personnel checked us in taxi configuration. We taxied to the holdshort and departed at 1904.

Another interesting fact about the E-6B is that the nosegear will not retract with the T-handle installed.

Immediately after takeoff, it became obvious that the T-handle was installed in the nosegear. Because our gross weight was about 40,000 pounds above max-landing gross weight, we continued, gear down, to Colorado Springs. We landed and performed one "T-handle-ectomy," then took off with enough fuel to complete our training mission.

Although a little embarrassing, this was a "no harm, no foul" mistake, with many good lessons learned. Thorough communication is a must if we're to fly safely. When we had returned to our parking spot for our FE to sign off the MAF, I should have been more directive in what I did and did not want the PC to do. A direct "Do not install the T-handle" would have saved some embarrassment.

Another important lesson focuses on attention to detail. When the PC releases me with a salute, it means, "I'm the last set of eyes on your jet, and you are safe to fly." We, as leaders, must let our troops know that attention to detail is as important to them on the ground as it is to us in the cockpit. 🦅

Lt. Meeks flies with VQ-3.